

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
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Auspicious Beginnings
Acts 9: 26-31

Reading

When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Message

The Bible story about Saul begins dramatically as he witnesses and approves the stoning death of Steven.¹ He goes on to get authorization from the high priest to capture and haul to Jerusalem anyone who belonged to the Way and he leaves for Damascus, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”² Then “... he [returns] to Jerusalem, [and] attempts to join the disciples; [but] they were all afraid of him...” It is no mystery why the disciples were afraid of Saul. It is an understatement to say “they did not believe that he was a disciple.” It’s certainly not an auspicious beginning. What did it take for them to not only show him the basic hospitality required of the culture, but welcome him into the church?

¹ Acts 7:58, 8:1

² Acts 9:1-2

Before we rush head long into that, we need to go back to what happened on Saul's trip to Damascus. Saul's companions heard a voice (The Lord saying, "Saul why do you persecute me?") and they witnessed Saul being struck blind and falling to the ground. Instead of abandoning Saul and fleeing in fear, they show him compassion. They lead him by the hand to Damascus and take care of him for three days. Then they let a disciple named Ananias (one of the people Saul set out to capture) enter the house and lay hands on him to heal him.

Ananias tried to warn God about Saul's evil persecution of the people of the Way, but God prevailed. The disciples let Saul stay with them for a few several days and are astounded by him preaching Jesus as Messiah. When the local authorities began plotting against Saul (and threaten the local church) the disciples lower Saul in a basket over the city wall. Not an auspicious beginning.

Back in Jerusalem, the disciples are faced with Saul trying to join them. Wasn't this the guy who was persecuting them? How do they end up not only welcoming him as a disciple but give him a place as an apostle and entrust him with preaching the message to others? Enter Barnabas. He stands up for Saul and tells the story of his conversion and preaching the good news.

Saul then goes out and about, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord and draws the ire of the Hellenists (Jews who were living a Greek life). The believers decide to send Saul off to Tarsus, the Greek city where he was born. Remember

what Jesus said about a prophet in his hometown? Tarsus was a Roman stronghold where Cleopatra and Antony met, a grand civic and religious capital where emperors are buried. We can imagine it was not ripe for conversion and evangelizing. Born a Roman citizen, Paul was most and least able to preach there- the city remained largely pagan for over three hundred years.³ Meanwhile, while Saul is away, the church in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria grow dramatically. The disciples left him in Tarsus for about 8 years until Barnabus retrieved him to help in Syrian Antioch.⁴ Again-not an auspicious beginning for Saul!

Who is this Saul? Saul is his Jewish name but he is also known by his Greek name Paul. He is the apostle whose letters comprise nearly half of the Greek Testament. They are the earliest documents and history of the Christian church, written long before the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles. Acts includes Saul as one part of the early church. Both Acts and Paul's letters report altercations with the other disciples and agree his ministry did not have an auspicious beginning.⁵ He began with persecuting Christians, risked the lives of the believers in Damascus and Jerusalem with his enthusiasm, by his own admission was limited in ministry by "a thorn in his side" (and appeared to be one for others), yet ended up the best known of the apostles. How exactly did that happen?

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarsus,_Mersin#Roman_period

⁴ Acts 22:3

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acts_of_the_Apostlesn

Lately I have been thinking of the people who have come into and gone out of my life and how they have influenced me. Today I'm thinking of mothers in my life; this includes my biological mother Marilyn who taught me to open my heart and home to the most vulnerable among us, as well as my adopted mom Jean who taught me how to visit and accompany friends in times of transition, and Linda my sister-mother-friend of deep conversations and fun adventures.

This makes me think of the book titled, *It Takes a Village*. It “focuses on the impact individuals and groups outside the family have, for better or worse, on a child's well-being.”⁶ I think of it in a broader way. It takes a village to raise a child but it takes a community to keep becoming who we are our whole lives. Every human and fur companion, event, book or movie, church and worship experience influences us in some way and it takes a community to empower and support us.

When we look at Saul's story we can see all the influences he had starting with his parents and the Hellenized Jewish community that educated him and raised him in two cultures, to the high priest and the people who trusted him to watch over their cloaks as they committed violence against Steven. They helped form him as an orator, determined personality, and Jewish Roman citizen that allowed and propelled him to places the other disciples did not and could not go.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_Takes_a_Village

Barnabus saw the Light within Paul. He not only believed him but he stood up to the disciples for him. But before that when Paul had a transforming experience of God his traveling companions took care of him, Ananias healed him, the disciples in Damascus hosted and saved his life. Then the Jerusalem disciples sent him off to cut his ministry teeth in Tarsus, called him back to go to Antioch, and challenged his message and call, strengthening his resolve and his determination. Saul/Paul's initial foray into ministry was not very auspicious but because of people along the way, his whole life turned out to be.

A friend told me a story about Alcoholics Anonymous. During the pandemic a new person used a landline phone to call in to the meeting. He had not been able to find a meeting nearby and had no transportation. He was warmly welcomed. At the end of the meeting someone offered to help him get a get a cell phone and another person offered to help him learn to use zoom. They said even if he could only zoom in they were there for him. He was overwhelmed. He said, "Wow you are so wonderful. This is the kind of support and community I have been looking for." The reply to him was "You don't have it if you can't give it to other people."

Friend Darrell Warren influenced me this week. He said that community provides us a reference- if you get too far out you look back can see where you need to return to be grounded. Astronauts need to be tethered or they can lose orientation in the big open universe. There is no up or down. That's what the

meeting did and does for us- it is the tether- it helps us to not get lost, and the connection to each other helps us tether to God. What if you were the last person on earth- how would your tether/relationship to God change?

In our meeting, each Friend influences, nurtures, and helps trim the wick of the Light of another. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The church is only the church when it is there for others....not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling what life in Christ is, what it means ‘to be there for others.’” Who are the Spark protectors and Light nurturers in your life? And who do you do these things for? With the abundant support we give and experience in our meeting, we can all experience auspicious beginnings.